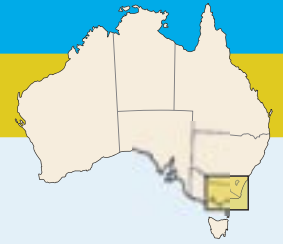


Your great Australian journey starts here

HIGH COUNTRY LOOP



Length: 7–10 days Fly/drive option: Melbourne

Explore Australia's highest peaks, our beloved Snowy River and the wonderful coast at Wilsons Promontory on this meandering loop. Set the mountain mood through the soaring mountain-ash forest of the Black Spur. Wind around Lake Eildon before being funnelled into the high country through the culinary corridor of the Ovens Valley. Spend a few days skiing, snowboarding or hiking amid some of the high country's great names – Mt Buffalo, Mt Hotham and finally Mt Kosciuszko – before returning towards Melbourne alongside the Snowy River and the Gippsland coast.

Travel tips

Pack some warm clothing whatever the season, because nights in the mountains are likely to be cold, even in summer.

The Barry Way from Jindabyne towards Buchan is a beautiful and remote route suitable for confident but careful drivers in 2WDs. The road is narrow, winding, mostly unsealed and unsuitable for towing. It's advisable to check road conditions in Jindabyne before beginning this section of the drive.


If driving in winter, check ahead on road conditions, as snow or ice may be on some of the higher roads. Chains may be required.

There are two busy tourist seasons in the mountains: winter for skiers and snowboarders, and summer for sightseers and walkers, when there's usually still pockets of snow on the ground and some areas become carpeted in wildflowers.

Websites

- www.legendswinehighcountry.info
- www.snowymountains.com.au
- www.gippslandtourism.com.au
- www.visitvictoria.com

High Country Loop – Travel Times		
Route	Distance	Duration
Melbourne – Wangaratta	309 km	4hrs 10mins
Wangaratta – Omeo	187 km	2hrs 30mins
Omeo – Jindabyne	342 km	4hrs 40mins
Jindabyne – Bairnsdale	232 km	3hrs
Bairnsdale – Leongatha	163 km	2hrs 20mins
Leongatha – Melbourne	148 km	2hrs



A to B Melbourne to Mansfield

Leave Melbourne (www.visitmelbourne.com) on the Maroondah Highway, heading up into the Yarra Valley to begin your drive in relaxed style among the region's 40-plus **cellar doors**. Try a champagne breakfast as you float over the valley on a **hot-air balloon flight** (www.hotairballooning.com.au; www.globalballooning.com.au).

Before leaving the Yarra Valley, pay a visit to the **Healesville Sanctuary** (www.zoo.org.au/healesville/), one of the best places in the country for a close-up view of native wildlife. Main attractions at this zoo include the Platypus Discovery

enclosure and the Birds of Prey flight demonstrations. If you're thirsty or hungry, seek out the restored **Healesville Hotel** (www.healesvillehotel.com.au), awarded the 'country hotel of the year' in the 2006 *Age Good Food Guide*.

Out of Healesville the road sets the mountain mood by climbing through the wonderful Black Spur, where giant mountain ash rise ramrod-straight beside the winding road. At the northern foot of the Black Spur, turn in to Marysville (www.marysvilletourism.com), once the **honeymoon capital** of Victoria and still a place to love. Amid the king parrots that frequent the town, you can wander out to Steavenson Falls, one of Victoria's highest. It's floodlit at night for those romantic evening strolls. Equally impressive is the Big Tree; at 84 m the State's tallest known tree. It can be seen along the Cumberland Walk in Cumberland Memorial Scenic Reserve.

Return to the Maroondah Highway at Buxton, journeying north below the razor-sharp ridge of the Cathedral Range and past Lake Eildon, which can hold up to six times the volume of Sydney Harbour. Pass through Bonnie Doon – the holiday town immortalised in the film *The Castle* – to reach Mansfield (www.mansfield.vic.gov.au). You can hire a **houseboat** to cruise about the lake for a few days (www2.visitvictoria.com).

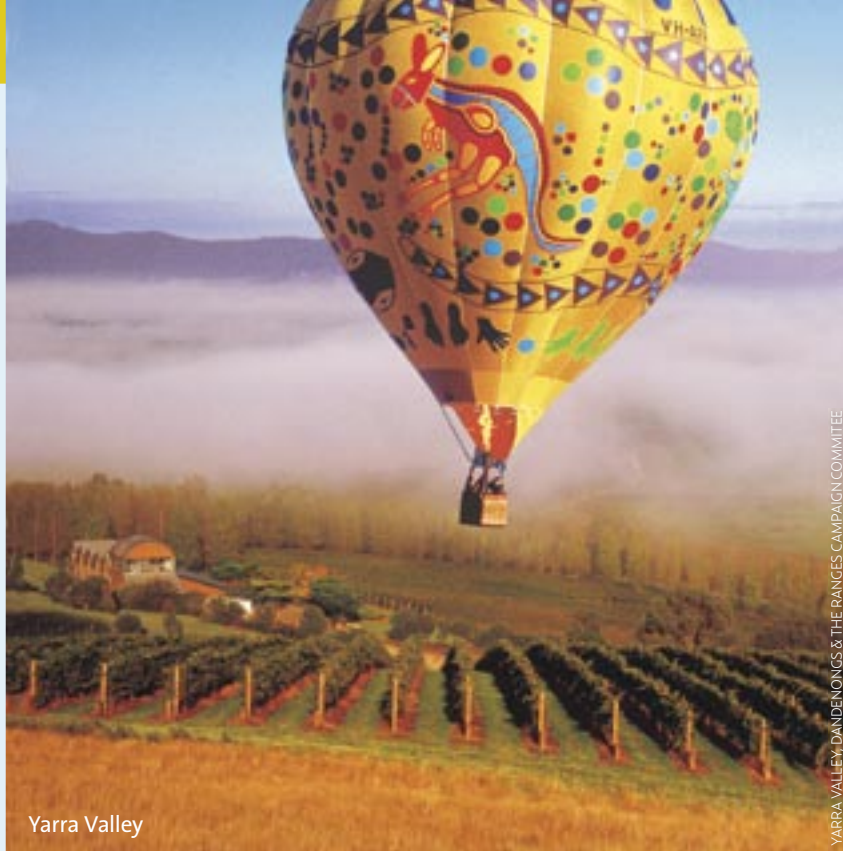
At the foot of the High Country (www.legendswinehighcountry.info), Mansfield is the major base for exploring the mountains on **horseback** (www.highcountryhorses.com.au; www.mountainvalleytrailrides.com), including country that featured in *The Man from Snowy River* film. There are also **camel treks** (www.calmwaters.com.au). Gourmands will find satisfaction at the residential cooking school at Howqua Dale Gourmet Retreat (www.gtoa.com.au).

B to **C** Mansfield to Beechworth

Take the road north from Mansfield towards Whitfield, watching for the Stringybark camping reserve. Here, you'll find the **Kelly Tree**, the site of an armed clash between the Ned Kelly gang and policemen (the graves of the three policemen killed in the fight are in Mansfield). There's another bushranger connection ahead at Powers Lookout (named for the outlaw Harry Power), though it's more noted for its views, which include Victoria's most striking peak, Mt Feathertop.

Descend through Whitfield and follow the King Valley into Oxley. The King Valley (www.kvv.com.au) is a quiet favourite among wine buffs, and it's well worth spending some time at the **cellar doors**. For food to complement your purchases there's nowhere better than Milawa (www.milawagourmet.com), the tiny town with a large epicurean reputation. Nibble your way through the Milawa Cheese Company, Milawa Mustards, The Olive Shop and Whitehead's Meadery and Honey.

Wind towards the gold-rush town of Beechworth. Ned Kelly was tried here; Robert O'Hara Burke was once superintendent of police. More than 30 buildings in the historic precinct are listed by the National Trust. Nearly as precious as gold is the great selection of accommodation and dining in town (www.beechworth.com). Check out also the boutique **Bridge Road Brewers**, sampling from among the seven ales in the timber-clad brewery.



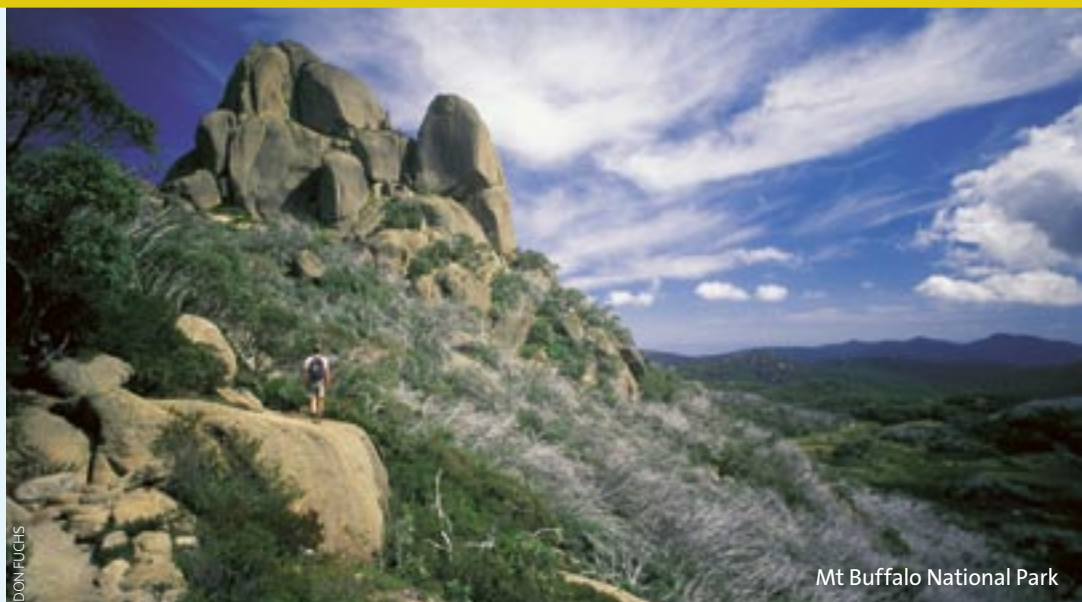
Yarra Valley



Cathedral Ranges



Mt Buller



Mt Buffalo National Park

C to D Beechworth to Corryong

Return south to the Great Alpine Road (www.greatalpineroad.info), following it beneath Mt Buffalo and into Bright (www.brightvictoria.com.au). If you're feeling energetic you can cycle the Murray to the Mountains Rail Trail (www.railtrail.com.au), Australia's showcase rail trail, connecting Wangaratta, Beechworth and Bright; **bike hire** is available in Wangaratta and Bright.

Bright is prized for its rich autumn colours – celebrated in the annual **Bright Autumn Festival** (www.brightautumnfestival.org.au) – but is a town for all seasons. In winter it's a great base for **skiers**, and in spring and summer it's home to walkers and other adventure seekers. For a literal high, you can **hang-glide** from the top of Mt Buffalo (www.eagleschool.com.au) or take a 300 m **abseil** (www.adventureguidesaustralia.com.au).

Out of Bright, the Great Alpine Road makes a steep climb to the alpine heights of Mt Hotham, descending again through the snow gums to Omeo. Turning north here, it's a short drive to Anglers Rest and the isolated **Blue Duck Inn** (www.blueduckinn.com.au), a hidden treasure of the High Country and perfect for a classic high-country pub stay. **White-water rafting** trips through the Mitta Mitta gorge operate from nearby (www.whitewater rafting.com.au; www.rapiddescents.com.au).

The Omeo Highway makes a lonely journey north, winding through a spectacular section of the High Country and following the Mitta Mitta River out to Lake Hume near Tallangatta. The original Tallangatta township was flooded to create Lake Hume in the 1950s and at times of low water you can see parts of the old town on the lake bed.

Turning east on the Murray Valley Highway, it's about an hour's drive into Corryong, a town central to the legend of the *Man from Snowy River*: pay homage to Jack Riley – allegedly the inspiration for Banjo Paterson's poem – in the town graveyard; visit the Man from Snowy River Folk Museum; or come at the end of March for the annual **Man from Snowy River Bush Festival** (www.manfromsnowyriverbushfestival.com.au), celebrating High-Country culture.

E The Snowy Mountains

From Corryong the climb begins into Australia's highest mountain region, the Snowy Mountains (www.snowymountains.com.au).

Out of Khancoban, 10 km along the Alpine Way, you can tour the viewing gallery inside the Murray 1 Power Station (11 a.m. and 2 p.m. daily) for a peek at the great engineering marvel of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme or visit the Murray 1 Visitors Centre where you can interact with hands-on models, displays and exhibits. Winding on through the mountains, excellent views open out onto the western slopes of the Snowy Mountains, before you make the final steep climb up to the **ski resort** of Thredbo (www.thredbo.com.au).

From Thredbo, in summer, you can make the walk to the highest peak in mainland Australia, **Mt Kosciuszko**; a gentle 13 km return alpine stroll begins from the top of the 1.8 km long Kosciuszko Express Chairlift or, if you're feeling especially energetic, you can hike up from the village. You can also experience the thrill of downhill **mountain biking** on the Cannonball Run. After riding the chairlift, descend almost 600 m of altitude down the leisurely Village Trail or bumping through rock gardens and the various obstacles of the 'terrain park'. To cycle the Cannonball Run you must first complete the 'Cannonball Initiation' with RawNRG (www.rawnrg.com.au).

Jindabyne, at the eastern end of the Alpine Way, is the perfect base for forays into Kosciuszko National Park (www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au), as well as **sailing** on Lake Jindabyne, **rafting** the upper Murray River or wandering through the mountains on **horseback** (www.discoverjindabyne.com).

F to G Jindabyne to Lakes Entrance

From Jindabyne, turn south onto the quiet, mostly unsealed Barry Way, crossing over Wallace Craigie Lookout and into Gippsland (www.gippslandtourism.com.au). Pass the old wooden schoolhouse at Suggan Buggan before making the detour east to McKillop Bridge inside Snowy River National Park (www.parkweb.vic.gov.au). Here, as the Deddick River merges with the Snowy River, you'll find some good river **beaches** (and camping). McKillop Bridge is also the launch point for **rafting trips** along the famous Snowy River (www.karoondapark.com/sre; www.rapiddescents.com.au); trips range from one to four days. Just west of McKillops Bridge is Little River Gorge, the deepest in Victoria, which you can view from a **cliff-top lookout**.

The route continues south, through Gelantipy and Karoonda Park (www.karoondapark.com), where there's accommodation and **horse trail rides**.

At Buchan, delve into the **Buchan Caves** (www.parkweb.vic.gov.au), where there are two show caves, Fairy and Royal, replete with limestone formations.

Join the Princes Highway at Nowa Nowa and follow it south to the perennial holiday town of Lakes Entrance (www.lakes-entrance.com), the outlet for the vast Gippsland Lakes. A short walk across the footbridge from the centre of town leads to the long sweep of Ninety Mile Beach. Walk about 30 minutes further and you can view the actual 'entrance'. To see more of one of Australia's finest boating destinations, take a **lake cruise** or **hire a boat** (www.lakes-entrance.com).



DESTINATION GIPPSLAND

G to A Lakes Entrance to Melbourne

As you journey west towards Bairnsdale, make a couple more detours to the lake shores at restful Metung and Paynesville. A brief **ferry ride** from Paynesville is Raymond Island, one of the best places in Australia to see **koalas** – 42 were released on the island in the 1950s, and within half a century the population had grown to more than 600.

Bairnsdale (www.gippslandtourism.com.au) and Sale (www.salecommunity.com) are two of Gippsland's major service towns, and in Bairnsdale be sure to visit the **Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place** for a look at the local Aboriginal history and culture. Birders will enjoy the boardwalk at McLeod Morass.

In Sale you can't miss the striking design of the award-winning Esso BHP Billiton Wellington Entertainment Centre (www.tourismwellington.com.au). Try to catch a production here.

Turn south at Sale onto the Gippsland Highway, stopping to explore quiet and historic Port Albert – Victoria's first port – before detouring south into **Wilsons Promontory National Park** (www.parkweb.vic.gov.au), the most southerly spot on the mainland, hanging off the coast like a hook.

'The Prom', as it's known, is one of Victoria's most popular national parks – a favourite among holidaymakers and bushwalkers. The latter venture out to beach havens such as Refuge Cove and Waterloo Bay, while the former can camp or stay in units at Tidal River among the wombats. At Tidal River, Norman Beach offers both surf and sun, while a range of **short walks** meander around the area.

The journey back to Melbourne follows the South Gippsland Highway through Leongatha and Korumburra, where you'll find the **Coal Creek Heritage Village** (www.coalcreekvillage.com.au), built around the original coalmines and fitted out like a 19th-century coalmining operation.

Make a final stop at the Royal Botanic Gardens (www.rbg.vic.gov.au) in Cranbourne, wandering through the **Australian Garden**, opened in 2006. This remarkable garden features around 10,000 plants in 15 different landscapes. ■